

THE WASHINGTON STAR - 27 April 1961

PARTIAL TEXT OF KENNEDY'S SPEECH

News Restraint Held Vital

Following is a partial text of President Kennedy's speech last night before the Bureau of Advertising of the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York:

I want to talk about our common responsibilities in the face of a common challenge. The events of recent weeks may have helped to illumine that challenge for some; but the dimensions of its threat have long loomed this large on our horizon.

This deadly challenge imposes upon our society two requirements of direct concern to both the press and the President—two requirements that may seem almost contradictory in tone, but which must be reconciled and fulfilled if we are to meet this national peril. I refer, first, to the need for far greater public information; and second, to the need for far greater official secrecy.

Question of Restraint

The very word "secrecy" is repugnant in a free and open republic; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it. Even today, there is little value in opposing the threat of a closed society by imitating its arbitrary restrictions. Even today, there is little value in insuring the survival of our Nation if our traditions do not survive with it. And there is very grave danger that an announced need for increased security will be seized upon by those anxious to expand its meaning to the very limits of official censorship and concealment.

That I do not intend to permit. And no official of my administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes or to withhold from the press and the people the facts they deserve to know.

Security Supersedes Rights

But I do ask every publisher, every editor, and every newsman in the Nation to re-examine his own standards, and to recognize the nature of our country's peril. In time of war, the Government and the press have customarily joined in an effort, based largely on self-discipline, to prevent unauthorized disclosures to the enemy. In time of "clear and present danger," the courts have held that even the privileged rights of the First Amendment must yield to the public's need for national security.

Today no war has been declared—and however fierce the struggle, it may never be declared in traditional fashion. Our way of life is under attack. Those who make themselves our enemy are advancing around the globe. The survival of our friends is in danger. And yet no war has been declared, no borders have been crossed, no missiles have been fired.

A Change in Tactics

If the press is awaiting a declaration of war before it imposes the self-discipline of combat conditions, then I can only say that no war ever posed a greater threat to our security. If you are awaiting a finding of "clear and present danger," then I can only say that the danger has never been more

clear and its presence has never been more imminent.

It requires a change in outlook, a change in tactics, a change in missions—by the Government, by the people, by every businessman, union leader and newspaper. For we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means of expanding its sphere of influence—on infiltration instead of invasion, on subversion instead of elections, on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day.

Every democracy recognizes the necessary restraints of national security—and the question remains whether those restraints need to be more strictly observed if we are to oppose this kind of attack as well as outright invasion.

Our News Aids Enemy

For the facts of the matter are that this Nation's foes have openly boasted of acquiring through our newspapers information they would otherwise hire agents to acquire through theft, bribery or espionage; that details of this Nation's covert preparations to counter the enemy's covert operations have been available to every newspaper reader, friend and foe alike; that the size, the strength, the location and the nature of our forces and weapons, and our plans and strategy for their use, have all been pin-pointed in the press and other news media to a degree sufficient to satisfy any foreign power; and that, in at least one case, the publication of details concerning a secret mechanism in our possession required its alteration at the expense of considerable time and money.

Security As A News Test

In the absence of open warfare, they recognized only the tests of journalism and not the tests of national security. And my question tonight is whether additional tests should not now be adopted.

That question is for you alone to answer. No public official should answer it for you. No Government plan should impose its restraining against your will. But I would be failing in my duty to the Nation if I did not commend this problem to your attention, and urge its thoughtful consideration.

On many earlier occasions, I have said—and your newspapers have said—that these are times that appeal to every citizen's sense of sacrifice and self-discipline. They call out to every citizen to weigh his rights and comforts against his obligations to the national good. I cannot now believe that those citizens who serve in the newspaper business consider themselves exempt from that appeal.

Is It in National Interest?

I have no intention of establishing a new office of war information to govern the flow of news. I am not suggesting any new forms of censorship or new types of security classification. I have no easy answer to the dilemma I have posed, and would not seek to impose it if I had one. But I am asking the members of the newspaper profession and industry in this country to re-examine their own obligations—to consider the degree and the nature of the present danger—and to heed the duty of self-restraint which that danger imposes upon us all.

Every newspaper now asks it-

...with respect to every story. ...it news?" All I suggest is that you add the question: "Is it in the national interest?" And I hope that every group in America, unions and businessmen and public officials at every level—will ask the same question of their endeavors, and subject their actions to this same exacting test.

And should the press of America consider and recommend the voluntary assumption of specific new steps or machinery, I can assure you that this administration will cooperate wholeheartedly with those recommendations.

Perhaps there will be no recommendations. Perhaps there is no answer to the dilemma faced by a free and open society in a cold and secret war.

II.

Duty to Inform and Alert

It is the unprecedented nature of this challenge that also gives rise to your second obligation—an obligation which I share. And that is our obligation to inform and alert the American people—to make certain they possess all the facts they need, and understand them as well—the perils, the prospects, the purposes of our program and the choices we face.

No President should fear public scrutiny of his program. For from that scrutiny comes understanding; and from that understanding comes support. I am not asking your newspapers to support me at all times on the editorial page—this is not Utopia yet.

But I am asking your help in the tremendous task of informing and alerting the American people. For I have complete confidence in the response and dedication of our citizens whenever they are fully informed.

I not only could not stifle controversy among your readers—I welcome it. This administration intends to be candid about its errors; for, as a wise man once said "An error doesn't become a mistake until you refuse to correct it." We intend to accept full responsibility for our errors; and we expect you to point them out when we miss them.

The Purpose of the Press

Without debate, without criticism, no administration can succeed—and no republic can survive. That is why the Athenian lawmaker Solon decreed it a crime for the citizen to shrink from controversy. And that is why our press was protected by the First Amendment—the only business in America specifically protected by the Constitution—not primarily to amuse and entertain, not to emphasize the trivial and the sentimental, not simply to "give the public what it wants"—but to inform, to arouse, to reflect, to state our dangers and our opportunities, to indicate our crisis and our choices, to lead, mold, educate and sometimes even anger public opinion.

This means greater coverage and analysis of international news—for it is no longer far away and foreign, but close at hand and local. It means greater attention to improved understanding of the news as well as improved transmission. And it means, finally, that Government at all levels, must meet its obligation to provide you with the fullest possible information outside the very narrow limits previously mentioned—and this administration intends to meet that obligation to a degree never before approached by any nation in the world.